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ABSTRACT

A long-standing feature of the Scottish education system has been the transfer of most children at about the age of 11 from a smaller primary school to a larger secondary school with a different type of class organization and curriculum. This study surveyed children in the Glasgow area nearing the end of primary education and those just beginning their secondary education regarding their experiences with the transition to secondary school. Survey findings were supplemented with information obtained through a small number of focus group discussions and data obtained from teachers and school records. Findings suggested that most children coped well with the move and were positive about preparation programs. There were indications that more children of minority ethnic backgrounds than white children encountered more difficulties and disappointments in their adjustment to secondary school. Primary school teachers' predictions about how well individual students would manage the social and environmental aspects of the transition corresponded well with the actual experiences that the child later reported. Education policy and school practice implications include making slight modifications to existing transition preparation programs, paying additional attention to transition problems as secondary students adjust to their new placement, and giving particular attention to assisting pupils of minority ethnic backgrounds. (KB)

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September 2003

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Spotlight 89

UNIVERSITY of GLASGOW

Negotiating the transition to secondary school

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This Spotlight reports the findings of a survey of children nearing the end of primary education (in their P7 year) and those just beginning their secondary education (in S1) regarding their experiences of the transition to secondary school. Findings suggest that most children coped well with the move and were positive about preparation programmes. There were indications that more children of minority ethnic backgrounds (though still a minority) encountered more difficulties and disappointment.

The study was funded by the Esme Fairburn Charitable Trust, and was conducted by colleagues at the University of Glasgow's Centre for the Child and Society.

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INTRODUCTION

A long-standing feature of the Scottish education system has been the transfer of most children at about the age of 11 from a smaller primary school to a larger secondary school with a different type of class organisation and curriculum. Previous research has shown that most children making the transition have considerable anxieties about the changes, but also often positive anticipations about the new opportunities (Anderson *et al*, 2000; Lucey & Reay, 2000; Stradling & MacNeil, 2000; Zeedyk *et al*, 2003).

The move is also commonly accompanied by a dip in attainment, while some children engage less well with class teaching and school work (Galton *et al*, 2000). As a result, education authorities and schools have introduced a range of measures especially to help improve communication among children, teachers and parents, and sometimes to improve curricular continuity (Galton *et al*, 1999; Waldon, 2000).

Children from minority ethnic backgrounds move between and manage different cultural worlds at home, at school, and in other areas of their lives, and the transition to secondary school may thus have particular connotations for them. Anecdotal evidence indicates that they can feel disadvantaged as regards certain specific knowledge areas, while some of their own expertise is not acknowledged (eg with respect to language and religion). Racist verbal abuse may also become more prominent, and teachers and schools may vary in the extent to which they are aware of and respect cultural diversity.

Questions of identity can thus take on heightened significance for minority ethnic pupils, as they mediate different expectations about adolescent behaviour and aspirations between family, school, peers, and community elders.

A study was carried out in the West of Scotland to examine the experiences and views of children making the transition from primary to secondary school. The research obtained feedback on different elements of transition programmes. A comparison was made between black and minority ethnic children and white children.

Previous studies in the US and England have indicated that children of certain ethnic backgrounds encounter greater difficulties than average at transition (Galton & Morrison, 2000), but this issue has not been examined before in Scotland, with its very different ethnic mix.

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THE RESEARCH

The study took the form of a school-based questionnaire survey of children in the Glasgow area, supplemented by a small number of focus group discussions with children, and data obtained from teachers and school reports. Three secondary schools, together with three each of their feeder primary schools, took part in the study. Pupils in Primary 7 and Secondary 1 classes completed questionnaires in May–June 2002. The P7 pupils filled in a follow-up questionnaire in October 2002 after their move to secondary school.

Two-hundred and sixty-eight (268) P7 pupils participated in the first survey, of whom 173 also took part in the second stage of the study. A total of 343 pupils in S1 classes took part in the first round survey.

ETHNIC IDENTITY, HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION AND FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Just under two thirds of the children in P7 identified themselves as white and nearly one third were of Pakistani Muslim background. Around one in twenty were of other minority ethnic background. The proportion of white children was higher in S1 (three-quarters). Two thirds of the children lived with both parents. A higher proportion of white children were living with only one parent.

One quarter of the children reported that a language other than English was spoken in their home, most often Urdu or Punjabi. Just over half the children said they were Christians and about one quarter were Muslims. About one in ten of the children with Muslim faith indicated that their school did not allow them to follow their religious beliefs as they wished (eg not being able to pray at the appropriate time).

> "Children are not allowed to go and read prayer in Ramadan." [1]

Most children said that they would talk about school-related social and emotional problems mainly to parents, rather than friends or teachers. Higher proportions of Asian pupils than others reported that they did not communicate with their parents about matters such as bullying or how happy they were. On the other hand, Asian mothers and fathers were said to be best informed about schoolwork, in relation to which more than 81% of mothers and over 61% of fathers were reported to know a lot.

EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF THE TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

Nearly all the children in P7 reported looking forward to one or more aspects of secondary school, of which the most popular were:

- making new friends (89%);
- learning new things (82%); and
- doing practical subjects (79%).

At the same time, nine out of ten pupils said they had concerns about going to secondary school, including significantly more boys and more children of Asian background. The issue on which the highest numbers expressed fears about not coping well concerned the change from being the big children in primary school to the youngest at secondary. From a fixed choice list, the items they chose most often were social or non-academic, ie concerns about getting lost (77%), not knowing anyone (55%), and getting picked on (53%). The aspect of school work and the curriculum that worried them most was having more homework (53%).

FEEDBACK ON TRANSITION PROGRAMMES

Most of the children had taken part in tours of the secondary school, secondary teacher visits to their primary school and induction days. A large majority also had experience of pupil and parent visits, primary school projects, and social gatherings and meetings with other P7s going to the same secondary school. However, significant numbers had *not* taken part in these activities, ranging from 6 to 23% at the three secondary schools.

Most children regarded all the main elements of transition programmes as helpful. Over 80% of the children thought that the time spent on preparing them for the transition was 'about right'. The most popular activity was the induction day.

Many of the pupils made suggestions about how schools could help make the transition easier for pupils, particularly to make the visits to secondary school longer and/or more frequent. There was no indication that the programmes were received differently by different ethnic groups.

> "I think what they are doing is excellent."

The most common criticism made by children, and also teachers, was that pupils who were not attending officially-associated primary schools were not permitted to take part in any aspects of the transition programmes.

> "I went to a school [in a different] catchment area, so they couldn't really do anything."

COPING WITH NEW ASPECTS OF SECONDARY SCHOOL

In general, once in S1 children reported coping better with the changes than they had expected, though the reverse was more often the case for pupils of minority ethnic backgrounds. The majority of children from all ethnic groups and all religions felt that they had settled well at secondary school. However, a lower proportion of Asian pupils (50%) than pupils from white (66%) and other ethnic groups (60%) said that they felt *very* settled. Likewise, somewhat fewer minority ethnic pupils felt positive about being at secondary school than white pupils.

Many S1 pupils said that they stopped being concerned 'almost immediately' (41%) and overall two in three said they had no longer been anxious after a month. How-

[1] Quotations are from children who took part in the study

ever a small proportion (2%) reported persistent worries, mainly about friendships and schoolwork.

On the whole, new S1 pupils agreed that the transition was not as bad as they were expecting. However a number of pupils stated that several aspects of being at the new school were worse than they had predicted. This applied particularly to homework (21%), finding their way around the school (15%), and having more teachers (5%). Children's advice for managing the transition included:

- be aware that secondary school is less frightening and more enjoyable than expected;
- make friends;
- talk to people about how you feel; and
- do not listen to rumours.

> "Be confident and not scared because there's nothing to be scared about. High school is fun."

Two thirds of the P7 pupils had predicted that their school performance would improve in secondary school with children of Asian backgrounds being most likely to be confident of improvement (80%). Asian pupils more often reported feeling very confident in relation to curricular changes, particularly with respect to having more homework (45%, compared to 30% of white pupils). Despite their higher levels of confidence and expectations, minority ethnic children were slightly less likely than white pupils to feel that they had improved academically once they actually arrived at secondary school (53% and 57%, respectively).

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE DURING THE TRANSITION

New S1 pupils were mainly positive about their teachers. Significant numbers reported differential treatment by teachers on the basis of a child's characteristics, such as behaviour and gender. Rather more than one tenth of pupils of minority ethnic backgrounds believed there was differential treatment related to religion, and slightly fewer that treatment differed on the basis of ethnicity.

More than one third of new S1 pupils (36%) said that it was easier to talk to primary teachers than their current teachers.

> "...because I used to have only one teacher for the whole year and I felt more comfortable with her."

One fifth, however, stated that it was easier to talk to secondary teachers.

There was a large reduction in reported experience of teasing and bullying, from three fifths (61%) at primary school to only one in five (21%) who had encountered this at secondary school. This may have been connected to the relatively short period they had been in secondary school, since previous research has not shown such a decline in bullying (Pelligrini and Long, 2002).

A higher percentage of white pupils than Asian and other ethnic groups stated that they had made a large number of new friends, while more also said that they felt 'much closer' to classmates since they made the transition (22% of white pupils, compared with 14% of Asian pupils). In addition, while a higher majority of Asian pupils than white pupils had reported feeling very confident with classmates *before* the transition, the trend was reversed once the children moved into their secondary class (37% of Asian pupils, compared to 46% of white pupils). Minority ethnic pupils were also more likely then white pupils to feel that there were difficulties 'fitting in'.

TEACHERS' VIEWS ON PUPILS' ACADEMIC PROGRESS

P7 teachers reported that most children were developing at least satisfactory English language skills. However, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds were over-represented among those who were performing poorly or satisfactorily in listening, talking, reading and writing, whereas more white pupils were very good or excellent. A similar pattern was evident in other subjects. The children that teachers reported to be doing less well academically tended to say they coped less well with the transition to secondary school. Minority ethnic pupils were thought to be the best behaved of the ethnic groups.

The S1 reports showed that fewer minority ethnic children were performing very well than their white counterparts, but white pupils were most likely to receive the lowest ratings. Asian pupils had a much greater tendency to miss school than pupils of other ethnic groups (40%, compared to 9% of white children). Yet teachers were slightly more likely to report that Asian pupils had a very good attitude to schoolwork (73%, compared to 68% of white pupils).

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

P7 teachers' predictions about how well individual pupils would manage the social and environmental aspects of the transition corresponded well with the actual experiences that the children later reported themselves.

Secondary teachers responsible for first year pupils reported on their general impressions about children making the transition, rather than on individual pupils. All the secondary teachers who took part in this survey of opinion (48) were white, although it was known that there were some colleagues of minority ethnic background. The teachers were not united in their perceptions of the experiences of minority ethnic pupils at the transition point. A number thought that they did not face any particular difficulties, while others said that they had different or additional problems.

The problem most commonly referred to was with English language skills, which was felt by some teachers to hinder progress. Other teachers felt that minority ethnic pupils mainly associated with children of a similar background, and a few explicitly accounted for this in terms

of a response to racist remarks and bullying. The differences between the cultures of the school and the home were thought by some teachers to create problems. Many thought that increased contact with language support staff or other staff from similar ethnic backgrounds would help transition arrangements.

CONCLUSIONS

On the whole the study revealed a positive picture of children's experience of school and of the transition to secondary school. There were, however, indications that for some children the changes were negative or disappointing, and that these children were disproportionately from minority ethnic backgrounds.

In terms of *education policy and school practice,* the following implications arise:

1. Existing transition programmes are seen by children as helpful and should be maintained, with little modification required.
2. However, these are largely preparation programmes, so more attention is needed to the second phase of the transition as children adjust to secondary school.
3. Children with placing requests should be provided with similar help in preparing and adjusting to secondary school.
4. Particular attention should be paid to mechanisms which may assist pupils of minority ethnic background and which capitalise on their high expectations.
5. Further dialogue seems to be required among teachers within and across schools about the different viewpoints held on the roles of school, the child and family in helping manage positively differences in religion, language and values.
6. It is important that teachers and schools continue to build on the strengths in families of minority ethnic background as well as attend to matters that may hamper a child's academic progress. This applies to situations where children are bilingual, for example.
7. Consideration should be given to implications of the finding that higher proportions of minority ethnic children said they did not confide in or seek support from parents.
8. Instances of discrimination and racist bullying need to continue to be tackled.
9. Recruitment of more teachers with minority ethnic backgrounds is desirable.

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